Users flock to improved swimming hole

By DANIEL YEE
Columbian staff writer

WASHOUGAL — In the few remaining weekend afternoons of summer, expect the Camas-Washougal Sandy Swimming Hole on the Washougal River to be jam-packed with inner tubes, swimmers and shore-lovers in lawn chairs.

Especially now that the park has been improved.

Washougal officials have helped make the park, 550 North Shepherd Road, a better place by installing a 2,500-foot deck, restrooms and an asphalt parking lot.

New deck, restrooms, parking entice more visitors to the park

Helping offset the $95,000 price tag for improvements was a $40,000 state grant, said Public Works Director Mike Conway.

City officials will celebrate the new face on the 1930s-era park with a grand opening from 11 to 1 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 25.

The park originally was owned by local families who dedicated it to both Washougal and Camas residents for recreational purposes, Conway said. Eventually Washougal annexed the park.

In recent years, the swimming hole's popularity has packed the park with ever more people. When it's crowded, the pristine wooden deck remains empty, as parkgoers overwhelmingly seem to prefer being by the water.

"When I've come before, (the park) usually has moms and kids, but now there are more teenagers," said Kathi Winter of Washougal.

SWIMMING/ *please see B6*

DAVE OLSON/The Columbi

Life on the river: *Anita Harter, left, of Vancouver looks on as Leona Smith walks her dog and waves to rafters from the bank of the Washougal River at the Sandy Swimming Hole Park in Washougal. A dedication ceremony for new improvements to the park is planned for September.*

Swimming

Users like park's family atmosphere

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She and other locals like the family atmosphere the park brings — and the fact that both sides of the river overlooking the swimming hole are under the watchful eye of Washougal homes.

"As a mother, when I come here with the children, I feel safe because of the homes. If it weren't for the homes, I wouldn't be here," Winter said.

"It's fun and refreshing," said Mickey Jefferson, a Camas resident reclining Sunday in her lawn chair on the sand and rocks right at the tip of the water. "The kids like the rocks and rapids."

The local moms also bring a level of safety to the swim-at-your-own risk river, as they try to point out shallow places where youngsters shouldn't try to dive.

"Toward the end of August and September it's too shallow," Winter said. "The beginning of summer, it's so deep, so you have to be careful. We make (our children) wear lifejackets."

They — and their cellular phones — have made another impact, curbing the bravado of teens who come to the swimming hole to drink beer in the middle of the afternoon. The moms know that one call and the police quickly respond.

Washougal resident Judy Lamb grew up with the swimming hole. Her parents live within eyesight of the river park. Her stepfather used to take swimming lessons from the old concrete dive platform installed in the rocks south of the big deck.

When she was in her teens, someone once brought an old 30-foot fire escape slide from the nearby Pendleton factory and installed it from shore to water. Everyone took turns sliding down it, propelled with buckets of water poured on the slide.

But now, she enjoys bringing her family to the water and collecting agates from the shore with her daughter.

Other children not in the water crowd the shores to look for blackberries or turn over rocks in the calmer parts of the river in search of crawdads.

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ROYCE POLLARD
Vancouver mayor

Depending on what's on the agenda, there are nights when the Vancouver City Council sits before an empty audience as well.

"We have a lot of issues that don't get any comment at all," Pollard said. "There are nights where we've had 25 to 30 people or a full house and other nights where we have had nobody."

Agendas for the Vancouver City Council are placed on the city's Web site, faxed to neighborhood associations and posted at the Fort Vancouver Regional Library.

Pollard said the city still isn't getting as much input at times as it would like, but efforts are being made to get attention from more people.

"We try to warn people well in advance what's coming," Pollard said. "You have to reach out to them any way you can.

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Camas resident